

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Below are the readings and sermon for Sunday July 26, 2020. I hope they have reached you in good health and the Spirit of our Lord.

In Christ's Peace,

Pastor Steve

Readings

John 13: 31-35

The New Commandment

31 When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Encouragement to Be Generous

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave

according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and,

by the will of God, to us, ⁶so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. ⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. ¹⁰And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. ¹³I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵As it is written,

‘The one who had much did not have too much,
and the one who had little did not have too little.’

Message

St. Paul is urging the Corinth congregation to monetarily support the Christian church in Jerusalem. In his appeal to them Paul not so subtly informs them of how the congregation in Macedonia gave to the ministry in Jerusalem despite having gone through a “severe ordeal of affliction” their selves. We are not given any insight into what the affliction is. Whatever the affliction is, the Macedonians have endured and persevered. Paul testifies to their resilience and how without pressure, on their own, they gave not just according to their means but beyond. Paul is wowed by their generosity of spirit, but does not doubt it’s origins. He knows because they gave all of their self to the Lord, they were primed for giving of their all to the Lord; in this case, the mission in Jerusalem. Paul is lifting up Macedonia’s spirit of generosity. Macedonia can do all things through Christ who strengthens them. And so can you Corinth.

These words to the Corinthians are not to be absorbed as an edict from on high. Paul is not threatening them to give or be ostracized from the faith and fellowship of God in Jesus. He instead approaches their faith sensibilities. If you are genuine in faith, there will be no question as to whether or not you will generous in supporting the ministry at hand.

If your heart, mind and soul resides in the generosity of the King who became a pauper on the cross for you, then what will flow out from you is love and support for God’s creation.

Now, Paul is not strong arming them. Even in the 1st century, people do not want to be told what they have to do. Encouraged? Yes. Guided? Yes. Given direction? Yes. But told...not so much so. Paul's appeal is that they take notice of Macedonia; once afflicted, but now on the mend with faith on fire. *See how they reacted? See where they put their trust? Now look?! They can't not help themselves. They are eager to respond, participate, and proliferate the riches of Jesus' life and death. Macedonia is living resurrected. And so can you Corinth. So too can you.* Paul insists his appeal to them is not a command, but it is a test. Have you matured in faith? Paul's advice is that they finish what they have started. Last year's desire need be realized now. The eagerness of spirit of then can come to full fruition today. Paul believes them to have the means to make a difference in Jerusalem. This is not about putting pressure on them so that they may simply know relief. No, this is about recognizing their abundance of blessings, as did Macedonia, and share with Jerusalem. Balance. Paul is not looking for Corinth to one up Macedonia's generosity. No he is challenging the genuineness of their desire to be God's church. Jerusalem is in need Corinth, what say you? You excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. Feeling abundant Corinth?

Abundance of life is a state of mind informed by the heart. Paul has tactfully called upon them to take stock of their blessed existence? If it is in Jesus Christ (as he truthfully believes it is), then the natural collective congregational heart that will ensue is one of generosity for their Jerusalem brethren. Paul knows that hearts bound to Christ are hopeful in times of

affliction because they know their Lord has, and will provide. And hearts bound to Christ are hopeful in good and prosperous times because they are faithfully aware the Lord is providing. Paul has named their abundance, and now urges them to let their heart and mind be of one in Christ. Whether the glass is half empty or half full, the heart strives to be full. There is always enough whatever is needed to go round.

From the summer of 2010 to the summer of 2011 I lived among the afflicted. Six deeply rural Iowa congregations afflicted by money problems. Five ELCA and one Presbyterian. The days of full sanctuaries and full offering plates were well in the past. Families moved to town or to the city. Big corporate farming outfits literally bought many a farm. Add to this the general decline of denominational Christianity and the outlook is bleak. Though this would not be their story. They know they're not the congregations they were when started in the 1870's, but yet they refuse to be victims of nostalgia, of days since past. They were still abundant in spirit and eager to be Christ's church.

They knew that in order for them to continue being fed through worship and be a missional church, they would have to do church life differently. Leaders would meet, and eventually a plan was developed. They would share the expense of a pastor and an intern. Each congregation would give according to their ability. The prayerful agreement was such that when one had a need the others were there to help. One congregation would provide the parsonage for the pastor's family. Another would provide the parsonage for the intern. The biggest congregation had 50 on Sunday. The smallest...maybe a dozen.

What each gave to the collective mission of the six was not necessarily proportionate to the number of people in the pews. Didn't matter, they trusted the bills would get paid, and their individual and collective missions would carry on.

Together they each could continue worshipping as they have for 150yrs. In their coming together a fulltime pastor was now a reality for all. In coming together, the smallest congregations were now less monetarily vulnerable. In coming together a lay preaching rotation came to life. In coming together a more robust support of the Open-Door Ministry in Omaha, NE came to life. In coming together an internship program for seminarians was established. And that is all I am aware of. In coming together the six congregations pooled resources both resurrected and created new opportunities to further God's kingdom.

Generosity flows out of abundance. The abundance amongst those congregations in Southwest Iowa was a result of not lamenting the past, but in being hopeful in the future. Each of them would say, we are a loving, welcoming, hospitable congregation. Just as we would say of Nativity, and dang near every other church that desires to exist for the sake of more than just itself. But here were six congregations wanting to get the Lord's work done, but needing a little boost in doing so. Six congregations whose generous spirit realized a more abundant future for all.

I cannot help but draw abundance and generosity parallels with our Nativity congregation. These days our affliction is everyone's affliction. We all share in the unfortunate reality of doing worship and church from a distance. This is challenging indeed. Despite our time apart you still support Nativity. What was begun in 1962 continues. Different for sure, but faithful nonetheless. When we return to sanctuary worship, what will we look like? Will everyone return at once, or trickle back in? Will on-line worship be more the norm than not? As the weeks now add up to months, what will become of the giving that supports the mission of Nativity? Will we need to think outside of the box as did the six churches in southwest Iowa? And what of the building project? That is still in the mix. In God's time.

Brothers and sisters, you have the means and I believe the spiritual eagerness to continue what God has started at Nativity well into the future. Like the Macedonians, abundant joy is nearing. The Spirit of the Lord is stirring. Generosity is flowing. Thanks be to God for your genuine love. We earnestly press on for the sake of those who yet know of His sacrifice and love; for those who we create, recreate, and try, try again. Paul challenged the Corinthians to not just desire or dream of being the Lord's church, but take those faithful and prayerful decisions. Those are words for us as well. God's abundance and generosity for the missional resurrected Macedonia, challenged Corinth, empowered Southwest Iowa Ministries, and will hopefully do more than just sustain Nativity Lutheran, but propel us forward. Amen.